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7CIA CHIEF TESTIFIES ON COVERT ACTIVITIES

7By ROBERT PARRY

7Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) - IN SECRET TESTIMONY LAST MONTH, CIA DIRECTOR WILLIAM J. CASEY CONFIRMED THAT U.S.-BACKED REBELS HAVE LAUNCHED SABOTAGE RAIDS INTO NICARAGUA BUT DENIED THAT THE AGENCY IS TRYING TO OVERTHROW THE COUNTRY'S LEFTIST GOVERNMENT, SOURCES SAY. ASKING TO REMAIN ANONYMOUS, SOURCES KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT CASEY'S TESTIMONY SAID THE CIA CHIEF TOLD THE HOUSE AND SENATE INTELLIGENCE COMMITTEES THAT THE COVERT ACTIONS ARE INTENDED TO CUT OFF WEAPONS HEADED FOR EL SALVADOR WHILE APPLYING PRESSURE ON NICARAGUA'S SANDINISTA GOVERNMENT.

BUT CASEY AND OTHER INTELLIGENCE OFFICIALS REPORTEDLY DENIED PUBLISHED REPORTS SUGGESTING THAT THE COVERT ACTIONS WERE OUT OF CONTROL AND WERE NOW TRYING TO TOPPLE THE SANDINISTAS. NICARAGUA HAS CHARGED REPEATEDLY OVER THE PAST YEAR THAT CIA-SUPPORTED, RIGHTIST REBELS HAVE CONDUCTED MILITARY RAIDS INTO NICARAGUA FROM NEIGHBORING HONDURAS. THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION HAS REFUSED COMMENT ON THE REPORTS. SOURCES SAID CASEY'S TESTIMONY WAS INTENDED TO DEFUSE CONGRESSIONAL CONCERN OVER THE DIRECTION OF CIA CLANDESTINE ACTIVITIES IN CENTRAL AMERICA, AND BY MOST ACCOUNTS, HE SUCCEEDED IN REASSURING SOME SKEPTICAL COMMITTEE MEMBERS.

SOME MEMBERS, HOWEVER, CONTINUE TO QUESTION THE CIA'S DISTINCTION BETWEEN PRESSURING THE NICARAGUAN GOVERNMENT AND TRYING TO OVERTHROW IT, THE SOURCES SAID.

IN HIS TESTIMONY, CASEY SAID ANTI-SANDINISTA REBELS WHO HAVE BEEN WORKING WITH THE CIA HAVE CONDUCTED RAIDS INTO NICARAGUA AND DESTROYED BRIDGES, THE SOURCES SAID.

NICARAGUA CHARGED LAST MARCH THAT "COUNTERREVOLUTIONARIES" HAD DYNAMITED AND DESTROYED THE RIO NEGRO AND OCOTAL BRIDGES, BUT THE SOURCES SAID IT WAS NOT CLEAR FROM CASEY'S TESTIMONY IF THIS WAS THE INCIDENT HE WAS REFERRING TO.

ONE SOURCE ALSO SAID CASEY AVOIDED GIVING A DIRECT ANSWER WHEN ASKED IF AMERICAN AGENTS HAVE ENTERED NICARAGUA. BUT ANOTHER SOURCE SAID CASEY AND OTHER INTELLIGENCE OFFICIALS STATED CLEARLY THAT AMERICANS HAD NOT PENETRATED NICARAGUAN TERRITORY.

(OVER)

CASEY REPORTEDLY PUT THE NUMBER OF CIA AGENTS INVOLVED IN THE CLANDESTINE ACTIVITIES AT LESS THAN 50; IN CONTRAST TO PUBLISHED REPORTS THAT HAVE ESTIMATED THE SIZE OF THE U.S. CONTINGENT AT AS LARGE AS 150.

CONGRESS HAS EXPRESSED GROWING CONCERN OVER CIA ACTIVITIES IN CENTRAL AMERICA; EVEN VOTING LAST MONTH TO BAR THE CIA FROM SUPPORTING "MILITARY ACTIVITIES FOR THE PURPOSE OF OVERTHROWING THE GOVERNMENT OF NICARAGUA OR PROVOKING A MILITARY EXCHANGE BETWEEN NICARAGUA AND HONDURAS."

THE HOUSE ADOPTED THE BAN ON A 411-0 VOTE AFTER BEATING BACK A MORE STRINGENT PROHIBITION. THE SENATE ACCEPTED THE HOUSE-PASSED RESTRICTION AFTER IT DEFEATED AN AMENDMENT TO BAN USE OF ANY U.S. FUNDS "IN SUPPORT OF IRREGULAR FORCES OR PARAMILITARY GROUPS" IN THE REGION.

SOME LIBERAL DEMOCRATS SAY THE BAN WILL STILL PERMIT THE AGENCY TO FUNNEL ARMS TO NICARAGUAN REBELS UNDER THE PRETEXT OF INTERDICTING GUNS GOING TO EL SALVADOR. THEY SAY THE RIGHTIST REBELS COULD THEN USE THE WEAPONS TO ATTACK NICARAGUAN FORCES.

SOURCES SAID SOME INTELLIGENCE COMMITTEE MEMBERS WERE PERSUADED BY CASEY THAT THE COVERT ACTIONS WERE GOING BETTER THAN THEY HAD THOUGHT. BUT ONE MEMBER, WHO ALSO ASKED NOT TO BE IDENTIFIED, SAID HE FEELS THE ACTIONS HAVE HURT, MAKING NICARAGUA'S GOVERNMENT MORE RADICAL AND LESS WILLING TO TOLERATE INTERNAL DISSENT.

THE DEBATE OVER EFFECTIVENESS OF THE COVERT ACTIVITIES IS LIKELY TO DOMINATE THE ATTENTION OF THE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEES IN THE NEXT SEVERAL MONTHS, ACCORDING TO THE SOURCES.

ANOTHER SOURCE SAID SOME OF THE MORE AMBITIOUS COVERT ACTIONS PROPOSED FOR NICARAGUA WERE DISCARDED AFTER EVEN CONSERVATIVE MEMBERS OF THE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEES OBJECTED.

THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION HAS BEEN OPENLY HOSTILE TO THE NICARAGUAN GOVERNMENT, WHICH SEIZED POWER IN 1979 AFTER OVERTHROWING LONGTIME DICTATOR ANASTASIO SOMOZA. THE ADMINISTRATION HAS ACCUSED THE SANDINISTA GOVERNMENT OF SUPPORTING LEFTIST GUERRILLAS IN NEARBY EL SALVADOR AND ACTING AS A BEACHHEAD FOR CUBAN AND SOVIET INFLUENCE IN THE REGION.

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